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Ethiopia makes money on donated food aid

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One of the biggest famine-relief operations of the century is reaching millions of people here. Yet behind the scenes two other dramas are being played out.

The Ethiopian government is making what some Westerners here estimate at $28 million a year in hard currency by exacting some of the highest entry-port fees in Africa on each ton of grain given free by other governments and individuals.

The military, Marxist, and impoverished Ethiopian government charges the United States and all other grain donors a $12.60 port fee on every ton of donated grain sent here.

Since December the US alone has sent 400,000 tons of grain, on which it has had to pay an entry-port fee of $5.04 million. It costs the US about $170 per ton to buy and send the grain. If Ethiopia receives the full 1.2 million tons expected this year from all donors, it will garner more than $15 million in entry fees on grain alone.

It charges high duties on other food and non-food relief items as well.

Four-wheel-drive Land Rovers paid for by some of the millions of dollars raised in Europe by rock star Bob Geldorf and his all-star Band Aid record were still sitting outside customs sheds months after delivery because Ethiopian officials were demanding steep import duties.

Military men and "civilian" crews from 12 East- and West-bloc countries cooperate in flying grain inside Ethiopia — but also maneuver to keep a sharp intelligence and security scrutiny on each other in a mini-version of cold war rivalries.

Military-trained crews on 12 Soviet Antonov transport planes and 22 Soviet helicopters strain to pick up intelligence, while guarding their own secrets, from British and West German air force planes and crews, and various planes and crews from Sweden, Belgium, France, Italy, and two civilian US charter planes.

Two big West German Air Force transports based at Dire Dawa in eastern Ethiopia are forbidden by Ethiopian officials to fly grain further east.

They must offload grain to East German planes to prevent Western crews from spotting Soviet military installations in the Ogaden region near the disputed Somali border.

"We talk to the East Germans and they talk to us," said one of the 45 West German military air and ground crew staff at Dire Dawa the other day. "They certainly know a lot about our planes. Of course, we know a lot about theirs."

The West German aircraft (Transalls, European-built versions of the US Hercules C-130 with two engines instead of four) pass and check out twice a day a runway hangar containing a large number of Soviet Flogger jet fighters. The Flogger is adapted to strafe troops on the ground.

Soviet Antonovs, together with Libyan planes, are regularly used to fly Eritreans and Tigreans from northern Ethiopia to the south in the government's massive resettlement program for 900,000 people. When the planes return to Addis, they are washed out with hoses.

From an analysis of the water runoff it has been learned that: the Antonovs fly densely-packed loads of refugees without pressurization; many of the passengers become ill; and cholera is known to be present (thus confirming increasing reports from French and Swedish doctors

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despite denials by Ethiopian officials).

The Soviets permit no outsiders, even Ethiopian grain handlers, inside their craft at any time. Their biggest planes carry 20 Soviet handlers who run sacks in and out (greatly lengthening loading and unloading times).

Both these darker sides of the massive relief effort contrast with the humanitarian impulses of both government and individual donors abroad, Ethiopian relief workers, and many of the military men themselves.

Few insiders are surprised that one of the poorest countries in the world, with its government now organized along Soviet lines, should seize the opportunity to generate hard currency from incoming grain shipments.

It is the scale of the profit that raises eyebrows, considering that the aid is given free of charge for the starving whom neither the Ethiopians nor the Soviets are able to help on their own.

"Food aid has become this government's biggest single earner of 'invisibles' [intangible earnings]," says one knowledgeable observer.

"And look at the exchange rate they fix for their currency [the birr]. Two birr to the dollar. That makes Ethiopian money stronger than the Swiss franc or the Deutsch mark."

Nor are diplomats taken aback at the East-West intelligence games being played here.

"Given the presence of Soviet, Eastern European, and Western air forces, it's to be expected," said one.

In fact, no US military forces are in the country. The Addis Ababa government reluctantly accepted British and West German air force planes and crews, but barred American ones.

Civilian TransAm transports, cited in press reports in recent years as having had links with the CIA, are kept away from Addis Ababa and the Soviet operations there and also those operations based in Asmara in the north.

Cold war rivalries are also in evidence. A West German Transall roared into a spectacular short takeoff at Dire Dawa recently, leaving the ground opposite the Soviet Flogger hangar. A West German officer grinned as he recalled it.

"See that [Soviet] Antonov by the hangar?" he asked. "It tried to match our short takeoff, but couldn't make it. It fell back, broke its landing gear, and has been sitting out there for 10 days now."

Despite all the maneuvering for profit and intelligence gains, millions of starving people are being helped.

The Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission puts the number helped by donated food at 5.3 million. The United Nations' figure is lower but still substantial at 3.5 million. Yet little is easy or straightforward here.

A shortage of civilian trucks and endless red tape slow down the movement of grain, and high port fees and tight security don't help create a better atmosphere.

Some Westerners would like to bypass the costs and congestion at the port of Assab.

They suggest either using twin-rotor Boeing transport helicopters able to carry 14 tons of cargo at a time from ship to famine camps, or by unloading relief ships at sea into smaller boats.

"But it won't happen," says one inside observer. "It would dilute government control, and bring in less hard currency."

Meanwhile, the Soviets here are making their own profits from their Ethiopian ally.

Moscow insists that each of the hundreds of military trucks shipped to Ethiopia — 300 stand at one military airfield in Addis Ababa alone — be handled by a Soviet driver, Soviet co-driver, and Soviet mechanic.

Their per diem expenses and their diesel fuel must be paid by the Ethiopians — who consider three men per truck too many, and who are reportedly incensed that Soviet trucks get less than four miles to the gallon.

One other report illustrates the Soviet search for consumer goods whenever they go abroad:

Eye-witnesses say that Soviet transports take off from the port of Assab lightly loaded with grain to Asmara, and return heavily loaded with the product of an Asmara factory: household washing detergent called Omo.